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ABSTRACT

Conditions in the early childhood profession that contribute to the development of a positive image of child caregivers are discussed. The first step in development of such an image of child care work involves the reaffirmation of the value of caring for and teaching young children. The second step involves examination and reconciliation of biases in the early childhood profession. Such biases include the field's unwritten status hierarchy, the notion of profitability, and negative attitudes towards parents. The third step is the development of a mechanism for internal change. The fourth step involves the development of an agenda for action. It is concluded that recognition of the power and importance of linkage between systems is of critical importance. Connections among those involved with children and families are the key to advocacy. The strength and effectiveness of advocates' efforts cannot be sustained unless advocates work in a profession that fosters a positive image of itself. (RH)

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Promoting Professional Value from Within

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Promoting Professional Value from Within

As child care issues impact more pervasively upon the nation's families, businesses, schools, and legislative bodies, information about those who provide child care services becomes crucial. Research examining the quality of child care programs has demonstrated that one of the most important determinants of quality is the adult with whom the child interacts on a regular basis (Coelen, Glantz, & Calore, 1978; McCartney, 1984; McCartney, Scarr, Phillips, Grajick, & Schwarz, 1982). Yet early childhood workers represent one of the most poorly understood and least rewarded of all professional groups (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 1984a, 1984b; Whitebook, 1984). While some attention has been paid to describing the variety of roles early childhood workers assume, the personal and professional histories brought to these roles, and workers' perceptions of their job environment (Katz, 1984; Kontos & Stremmel, 1988; Pettygrove, Whitebook, & Weir, 1984), less attention has been paid to conditions within the early childhood profession which contribute to the development of a positive image of those who work with young children. As society struggles with changing attitudes about the necessity and importance of quality

child care, it becomes important to understand how professionals foster development of their own image.

Reaffirmation of the Value of Children. The first step in developing a positive image of child care work involves the reaffirmation of the value of caring for and teaching young children. Increased need for child care coupled with heightened public awareness about the impact of quality child care on society (e.g., increased educational gains in later years; reduced employee absenteeism and turnover) provides an incentive for re-thinking traditional ideas and attitudes about child care work (Berrueta-Clement, Schweinhart, Barnett, Epstein, & Weikart, 1984; Clarke-Stewart, 1988).

If all who work with and advocate for the well-being of young children are encouraged to place value first and foremost on the caring for and teaching of young children, rather than on the conditions under which services occur (e.g., home, center, work site) or the credentials or training of those who provide services (e.g., CDA, caregiver, nursery school teacher, babysitter), the professional community will be more able to extend its resources to support the professional development of all those who work with young children.

Caring for and teaching young children is an intrinsically important job. Using this rationale, job

value could then be tied directly to the value of children themselves. Thus, working with children would be recognized as valuable regardless of who does it. It is important work when it is performed by parent, by provider, by teacher, and even by neighborhood teenage babysitter. It is fundamentally important work because children and their well-being are important. If it is recognized that at the core of caregiving is the value of children, than it logically follows that such work is best performed by those who have adequate training, reasonable working conditions and wages, and sufficient incentives for their own professional development.

Examination of Biases. The second step in developing a mechanism for enhancing the image of child care work involves examination and reconciliation of biases within the early childhood profession itself. These biases may include a hierarchy of status among different categories of professionals, attitudes of disdain for those who mention profit as a goal of caregiving, and attitudes about parents.

One of the most subtle and pervasive biases within the early childhood field comes from an unwritten status hierarchy within the field itself (Zeece, 1986). Those whose jobs carry the title "teacher" command more status than those who call themselves "caregiver". And those

who identify themselves "caregiver" are more highly regarded than those who perceive themselves as "babysitter". While leadership in early childhood education most often comes from center-based staff, the majority of the child care work in this country is being performed in family day care homes (Reed, 1988). It is not known how many of these homes are being operated by caregivers who identfiy themselves as "babysitters" or how "babysitters" are affected by either their job titles or status within the early childhood profession.

The notion of bias within the field of early childhood education is uncomfortable, if not unpopular. But if it is understood that such a bias is most often directed by public sentiment (i.e., public attitudes about child care workers, babysitters, and preschool teachers), then bias can be addressed in a much less personal way. Strategies for changing bias can then be developed.

Vander Ven (1985) has hypothosized a sequence of professional development of early childhood workers. This sequence begins with *novice* and refers to those practitioners who fill subprofessional positions. The most salient characteristic of novices is that much of their child care work is based upon personal intuition rather than formal training. Perhaps bias within the

profession is related to the lack of understanding of differences between entry level novices and more seasoned professionals, especially in terms of short and long term professional needs and goals. Thus, it becomes important to determine not only how many workers play a novice role, but also to understand how this role is valued and supported within the profession.

A second bias in early childhood education concerns the notion of profitability. Caldwell and Boyd (1985) have suggested that conflict about profitibility creates conditions within the early childhood field which may devalue child care work. Additudes about profit have led to minimal costing of child care services. And services which cost little in this society tend to be minimally valued (Caldwell & Boyd).

Child care businesses which "make money" are often viewed as exploitive or substandard. Yet until child care work is viewed by early childhood professionals as requiring well trained, well supported, well versed business professionals (as well as teaching and caregiving professionals), salaries are more likely to remain low and benefits remain meager or non-existent.

A final bias deals with attitudes toward parents. Within the rapidly changing society, child care workers are caught in a bind. Not only have families become

more diverse over the last several decades, but information about families has also changed. In an attempt to understand how child care work fits into society and to answer questions about the effects of child care on children and families, researchers and theorists have been through several phases (Bee, 1988). In the 1960s, studies emphasized the potentially damaging effect of children being separated from their mothers (Blehar, 1974). Research of the 1970s suggested that there were no replicable negative effects of child care on young children (Belsky & Steinberg, 1978). More recently, studies have been published that point to possible negative effects on children's emotional development (Belsky & Rovine, 1988); others have demonstrated less conclusive negative consequences (Thompson, 1988).

This intellectual bantering offers no clear theoretical direction and may contribute to the development of dichotomies and consequential negative attitudes toward parents. For example, professionals and public alike may feel the necessity to believe that: child care is either good or bad; children are either better or worse off in child care than at home with a parent; parents who work because they "have to" are caring or parents who work because they "want to" are

not caring. From these dichotomies, biases and resentment grows. The end result is often a defensive reaction or an attitude which fosters the notion that parents are no longer doing their job well. This can act as an inhibiting influence on the development of healthy parent-caregiver relationships.

Development of Mechanism for Internal Change. In all professions there exists varying levels of support and professionalism. Thus, an effective mechanism for enhancing the image *of* all early childhood professionals *by* their peers should ideally focus upon both attitudes and subsequent behaviors toward child care work (Caldwell & Boyd, 1985; Sheth & Frazier, 1982). Sheth and Frazier (1982) propose a four quadrant model which may be used to categorize the attitudes and behaviors of workers within the early childhood profession.

Some professionals may feel and act in supportive ways of child care work. These quadrant one workers genuinely believe in the value of child care work and demonstrate their support in overt ways. These professionals strive to unite all those who work with young children.

Quadrant two professionals are those whose actions appear supportive, but whose underlying attitudes toward different kinds of child care work are not favorable.

These early childhood workers might convey such feelings as "Of course, we would like to include the family day care people as part of our professional group, but they really are not teachers" or "Early childhood education is an important and exciting new component of our school system, but we cannot expect to pay them the same as elemenary teachers".

The third quadrant contains professionals who do not believe in the professional status of child care work and openly express negative views. Professionals falling in this quadrant may feel that child care work is substantively different from other more traditional early childhood endeavors. They may have strong feelings that the inclusion of child care workers into the early childhood field de-professionalizes the area for all concerned and they are not afraid to act on these feelings.

The last quadrant is filled by those professionals whose positive attitudes toward child care work are not accompanied by any recognizable actions. Professionals in this category may be slow to act in support of the professionalism of child care workers because of organizational, time, or socioeconomic constraints. Yet they are basically supportive of child care work.

Inspection of early childhood professionals within the framework of this model supports the view that an over-simplified approach which does not consider both attitude and behavior is not likely to be successful in understanding or dealing with change within the field. Any effort to unify the field and develop support for the inclusion of all child care workers as early childhood professionals must first deal with the biases and limitations within the field itself. A mechanism of change must include reinforcement for those who already support child care work with positive attitudes and behavior and education for those who do not.

Development of an Action Agenda. Reaffirming the value of children, examining biases, and developing a mechanism for internal change set the stage for the implementation of an action agenda which first entails taking tally of the *status quo*. How do professional organizations serve those who care for and teach young children? Is there representation in the membership, as well as the leadership of early childhood organizations proportionate to the different service categories within the field? As the voice of the profession is being heard across the country and within Congress, does this voice include the family day care providers who

currently care for the majority of children in this country (Reed, 1988)?

Recognizing the power and importance of linkage between systems also becomes critical. Child care work is no longer an unknown occupation. It is rapidly becoming a hinge upon which many systems must depend to function well (e.g., family system, school system, workplace system). Thus, connections among those involved with children and families become the key to advocacy. The voice for children becomes stronger -- more powerful than ever before. But the strength and long term effectiveness of this voice cannot be sustained unless it is housed within a professional body that fosters a positive image within and about itself.

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